



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

Baltimore bookstore hosts launch of book on Cuba's LGBTQ+ rights revolution

written by Struggle - La Lucha
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Urban Reads hosted a launch event for new book, “Love is the law: Cuba’s queer rights revolution.”

Baltimore, June 7 - Urban Reads bookstore hosted a launch event for the book, “Love is the Law: Cuba’s Queer Rights Revolution,” published by Struggle-La Lucha. This book documents the mass-democratic development of Cuba’s new Families Code, a comprehensive legal framework expanding the rights of women, children, LGBTQ+ people, seniors, those with disabilities, and ultimately all Cubans. Urban

Reads is a Black-owned bookstore targeted in recent months by neo-Nazis. They continue to stand firm. Solidarity with Urban Reads! Following is the presentation given by the book's editor, Gregory E. Williams.

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Stonewall means fight back!

Thanks for having me here, and happy Pride Month! This is a special Pride Month because of the conditions of this period. The fascist movement is attacking queer and trans people's struggles, and the struggles of the working class and all the oppressed in many countries. In the U.S., fascists aligned with Donald Trump have the reins of the government. Now is really the time to fight back.

They're trying to cut off working-class and oppressed people from their histories of struggle. By attacking Pride, they're trying to cut us off from the radical legacy of Stonewall and ACT UP. They don't just attack it for cultural reasons, because "people are tired of seeing it," as if the optics were what's most important. It's not about Pride merchandise in stores. They're attacking the struggle itself. They're attacking the very idea of struggle, in hopes that we will lie down to be oppressed and exploited.

So, in this context, I'm here to talk about the LGBTQ+ struggle in Cuba. We can learn a lot from Cuba. This talk builds on an interview I did with a longtime gay communist activist, Bob McCubbin, whose analysis is part of the bedrock of what I'm going to say. I was interviewing him, and he wanted to interview me about this book. We have his book available today, "[The Social Evolution of Humanity: Marx and Engels Were Right!](#)" Please pick up a copy.

Significance of Families Code

So, this collection that we've published through Struggle-La Lucha is called "Love is the Law: Cuba's Queer Rights Revolution." "Love is the law," or "*el amor es ley*," is one of the main slogans used in Cuba to promote the new Families Code, which is the focus of this book. The Code is a comprehensive overhaul of the legal system, expanding the rights of women, LGBTQ+ people, children, elders, disabled people, and ultimately all Cubans. It's about much more than same-sex marriage.

The book also includes the full text of Leslie Feinberg's "Rainbow Solidarity in Defense of Cuba." Feinberg was a U.S.-born transgender communist - a secular Jewish activist committed to the Palestinian liberation struggle. (Leslie used she / zie pronouns.) Zie had done a lot of analysis of what was happening in Cuba up through 2009 when "Rainbow Solidarity" was published. It forms the backdrop to the passage of the new Code. I'll recap that history.

There's a lot of disinformation about Cuba. The imperialists promoted the idea that Cuba was homophobic without giving any context. (Of course, at the time Cuba had its revolution, queer and trans people were routinely arrested in the U.S., subjected to shock therapy, etc. That's why Stonewall happened in the first place.)

But anyway, Leslie analyzed the history of colonialism in Cuba. It was a very repressive society. Spain had colonized Cuba. The Cuban people fought three wars of independence during the 1800s. The U.S. imperialists became dominant after that, taking control of former Spanish colonies in Puerto Rico and the Philippines. They kept Cuba under neocolonial conditions, exploiting laborers and stealing natural resources for Wall Street. In the 1950s, the country was controlled by a U.S.-backed dictator named Fulgencio Batista.

And Havana was basically being run by the mob for foreign tourists. There was a lot of what nowadays they call sex tourism, where these wealthy businessmen come in. There were prostitution rings that catered to people of any sexuality. And so a lot of

the gay, lesbian, and trans life in that time was distorted by that. Many were forced into prostitution. They lived on the outskirts of society. When the revolutionaries came to power in Cuba in 1959, they had to deal with this legacy.

Colonial Cuba had a slave system just like in the U.S. People of African descent were enslaved. The revolutionaries had to deal with this legacy, too.

They had to figure out how to integrate queer and trans people into the new revolutionary society. And revolutionaries are affected by the same prejudices as anybody else. They're human beings. Everybody is affected by their historical context. It's a learning process. They had to develop an understanding over time as they worked to build a better society.

Women led the way

And really, it was the women's movement in Cuba that blazed the trail. In the early period of the revolution, the Federation of Cuban Women was doing a lot of work on the ground just in terms of literacy campaigns, teaching people – agricultural laborers – how to read, and other incredible things. The revolution allowed women to take on a bigger role in society and advance their own rights.

And the women's organizations spearheaded the creation of the first Family Code in 1975. This was an advanced new legal framework that expanded the rights of women and children, providing equal pay and many other things that have not been achieved yet in the capitalist United States.

By the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic had come about, and it affected Cuba. They took a proactive stance in stopping the spread of the epidemic in their country. They provided care to people who contracted HIV and AIDS and supported them. Nobody had to worry about losing their job, being homeless and dying on the street. No, that's not an issue in Cuba. They provided health care and housing to all, and that

remains the case today as well.

Under the horrible conditions of the U.S. blockade, they had to do all these things with very few resources, but they were able to care for people with HIV and AIDS at a time when the U.S. government, under Reagan, was barely acknowledging the crisis. People had to throw their bodies on the ground in legislatures and churches, with the activist group ACT UP, and so on, demanding some bit of dignity. But in Cuba, they were taking care of people.

Cenesex launched

They developed an organization called Cenesex in the late 1980s, the National Center for Sex Education. It's under the Ministry of Health. And to this day, this remains the main hub in Cuba advancing the rights of queer and trans people. Think about it. Cuba's government of the people proactively advances queer and trans rights. The government doesn't just respond after the fact of a long struggle as in the U.S.

For example, Cenesex spearheaded the development of a law providing state funding for gender-affirming surgery. It passed in 2008.

Cuba has a popular democracy

And then in 2018, Cuba started a big process to write a new constitution. It's remarkable how this was done.

We have to understand that because of their socialist system, Cuba has institutions of mass democracy that we do not have in the U.S. They have Committees for the Defense of the Revolution throughout the neighborhoods, and local councils made up of regular workers from those communities.

They don't have millionaire legislators like we do, making money through

investments (bribes) from the corporations they're supposed to be regulating, including the military industry. The representatives in Cuba's Congress come from the working class. They come from the communities they serve and continue to live in their communities

Contrast Cuba's approach to reform with Trump's "big beautiful bill." While Cubans carry out mass-democratic processes to reform their system, in the U.S., officials - who generally can't be elected without big money - work in the dead of night to cram anti-people measures into legislation, including anti-trans legislation. All to enrich the few and take from the majority.

(By the way, 75% of this budget is for the military, ICE, and the repressive state generally. This is a big giveaway to the rich war profiteers.)

Cuba has all these democratic mechanisms that we don't have. Developing the 2019 Constitution involved people throughout the society, a mass consultative process. To create this constitution, they had meetings in the unions, women's organizations, youth organizations, in the universities, and more.

This constitution advances women's and LGBT+ rights. Imagine if we had the opportunity to write a new constitution instead of having our rights decided by how unelected Supreme Court judges choose to interpret a document written by slave owners in the 1700s.

Discrimination outlawed in constitution

Article 42 of Cuba's 2019 Constitution says:

"All people are equal before the law, receive the same protection and treatment from the authorities, and enjoy the same rights, liberties, and opportunities, without any discrimination for reasons of sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ethnic origin, skin color, religious belief, disability, national or territorial origin,

or any other personal condition or circumstance that implies a distinction injurious to human dignity. All people have the right to enjoy the **same public spaces and service facilities**. Likewise, they receive **equal salary for equal work**, with no discrimination whatsoever. The violation of this principle is proscribed and is sanctioned by law.”

So, they made many advances with the Constitution, but there was still resistance because of the colonial legacy of homophobia, etc. A lot of it came from the churches, but not all the churches. Many churches in Cuba support LGBTQ+ rights. But particularly the churches that are receiving funding and other influence from the U.S. and right-wing forces in Miami. These churches organized campaigns against any kind of progress for LGBTQ+ people.

So, there was resistance. But over the next couple of years, revolutionaries campaigned to have a referendum for a new Families Code, to update the legal framework to reflect the ways that Cuban society has changed since the 1970s. They had to go back to the drawing board with another mass consultative process. They went through about 60 drafts of this new Families Code. Between February and April 2022, they held more than 79,000 meetings, with over 6.5 million participants, making more than 397,000 proposals.

They held meetings in the neighborhoods, and people would raise issues, arguing them out. The population had a lot of input into creating this new code. And it passed with 66.85% of the votes in favor. The majority of the population voted to expand rights. That’s not an automatic process. That was a long process of mass democracy.

This Code recognizes all kinds of families, including those led by grandparents or step-parents. Or, say a lesbian couple and a gay male couple decide to start a family together, and they have children together. They are supported.

The Code specifies that all rights acquired with the 1975 Family Code are maintained. Rights aren't taken away; they are expanded.

Relations of affection and progressive autonomy

The Code recognizes relations of affection as the basis of the family, not just blood ties. This is a guiding principle, hence "love is the law." Another guiding principle is "progressive autonomy." That is to say, the autonomy and dignity of the individual are paramount – whether children, disabled people, or the elderly. Children and youth are recognized as having increasing, age-appropriate autonomy over their lives and bodies.

"Family defense" offices are established. In the case of custody or domestic violence situations, for example, children and youth can go to these offices and get aid from social workers, lawyers, and psychologists. They are creating mechanisms to give these young people an age-appropriate say in how family life is handled. The focus is no longer on parental *control*, but on parental *responsibility*.

Contrast this with the U.S. fascist movement's focus on parents being able to control exactly which ideas their children are exposed to in school. They're trying to limit children and youth from accessing information they need to understand their gender and sexuality. This is part of the push to dismantle public education and replace it with private schools and homeschooling.

Socialism allows people to flower

In Cuba, people aren't vulnerable in the same way that we are in the U.S. For example, here, if your family is broken up because of domestic violence, you risk being homeless. Cuba has problems, many because of the U.S. blockade, but the people don't have that kind of problem. Everybody has a right to housing. Nobody

loses their health care because they leave a situation of domestic violence.

I asked a Cuban friend of our 2023 U.S. Friends Against Homophobia and Transphobia delegation whether she had paid maternity leave after her baby was born. She said, “Yes, one year. And nowadays, it is extended to 15 months.” This extension of benefits was enacted with Decree-Law 84 in 2024.

Therefore, we must consider how all these aspects of socialist society support people so that they can truly flower.

That delegation to Cuba in May 2023 – organized by Women in Struggle-Mujeres en Lucha – focused on learning about the New Families Code. We met with Cuban trans and queer organizers at Cenesex headquarters. We met with delegates from the neighborhood assemblies. We went to the National Assembly of People’s Power and met with a deputy of the assembly. That’s like their version of the U.S. Congress. But they’re not millionaire career politicians. Even the highest-level representatives come from the communities and continue to work as plumbers, teachers, doctors, and so on.

Solidarity is the key

The blockade is not just economic. It’s political and also cultural. It’s a blockade of knowledge. Those of us struggling in the U.S. and other imperialist countries are being deprived of knowing about what’s possible with revolution, all while our rights are being reversed.

But the Cuban people are absolutely in solidarity with us. As much as we’re in solidarity with them, they’re in solidarity with us. They care about our struggle in the U.S., *in the belly of the beast*. They want to see us secure our rights. They want a future where we can develop together.

There's a lot in this book. Everybody in our delegation wrote testimonies. We also have statements from Cuban people. Cenesex director Mariela Castro's talk, which you heard earlier, is included.

A Cuban transmasculine activist named Verde gave a talk for us, which is included. His organization is doing incredible organizing. He describes the difficulties trans people face in being able to access hormones because of the blockade, made much worse when Trump put Cuba on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list in 2017.

Let me say something about the State Sponsors of Terrorism designation. Biden took Cuba off the list at the very end of his term, even though he could have done it earlier. Trump put it right back on.

But what audacity! The U.S. is literally committing genocide in Palestine right now, burning children alive in refugee camps. Cuba exports doctors and nurses. The U.S. bombs and sanctions. The monsters in Washington are the world's number one terrorists. Take Cuba off the list!

Finally, I just want to emphasize again that this book is continuing a tradition, continuing the work that was done by comrades like Leslie Feinberg and Bob McCubbin. I hope this book will help bridge the generational gap, making the history of struggle more accessible. There is a continuity of struggle. We must push back against those attempting to erase history.

I hope it brings *hope* to people in the U.S. and elsewhere. There is an alternative to capitalist oppression. With socialist revolution, people can continually advance instead of always being on the defensive, fighting each new attack from the ruling class. So, I say:

Stonewall means fight back!

Take back Pride!

¡Hasta la victoria, siempre!

